

Baltimore Oriole *Icterus galbula*



Folk Name: Fire Bird, Golden Weaver, Northern Oriole

Status: Migrant, Winter Resident, and sporadic Breeder

Abundance: Uncommon in migration and winter, Very Rare during breeding season

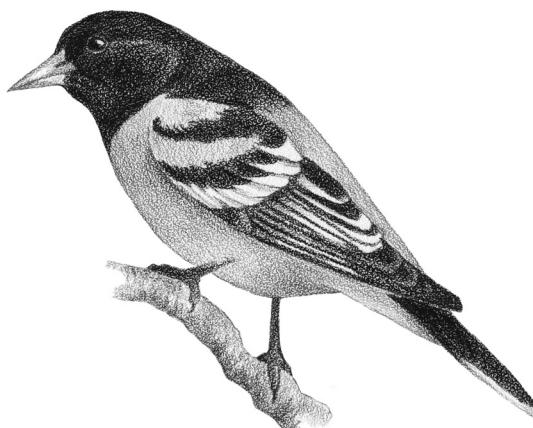
Habitat: Scattered hardwoods or open country during migration and riparian borders for breeding; bird feeders in winter

The male Baltimore Oriole is a gorgeous, bright orange-and-black bird that at 8 ¼ inches, averages just a quarter-inch smaller than our common Gray Catbird. In full adult plumage, he has an extensive black hood, orange underparts, an orange rump, and a mostly orange tail. He also has prominent white wing bars. Females and young males are a more dull orange-yellow color.

Much has been written about this striking bird. In the 1880s, it was one of the songbirds whose feathers were being widely collected for sale and use in the fashion industry. One report from the nationally prominent ornithologist J.A. Allen, published in North Carolina in July 1886, listed many examples of the numbers and variety of birds being commercially collected and noted: "A woman agent down in the quiet state of Maryland has been known to collect 50,000 birds (many of them the sweet singing Baltimore orioles) and ship them to Paris in a season."

Lila Ripley Barnwell, a famous North Carolina poet and early suffragette who lived in Hendersonville, shared this oriole sighting in an essay published in *The Charlotte Observer* on May 17, 1909:

Continuing my walk I came to a hilltop from where I had a view of an apple orchard in full bloom. Could anything be more lovely than these masses of pink and white fragrance, with here and there a few delicate green leaves. The ubiquitous bees were improving the shining hour, and a flame colored Baltimore oriole was joyously singing his appreciation of the orchard's beauty. I love that bird, for in spite of his fiery temper, he is such a gentleman, and shows it most especially with his wife. Their marvelous skill in architecture is shown in the queer flexible nests they build, which rain cannot penetrate, nor wind shake from its fastenings. It is said Lord Baltimore, weary and disheartened in the bleak north, decided to visit Virginia, he wrote that nothing so delighted him as the birds, particularly the oriole, and its gorgeous orange and black became the heraldic colors of the first lords proprietors of Maryland. Hush! 'tis he! My oriole, my glance of summer fire, is come at last.



The Charlotte Observer carried this piece on April 18, 1917:

The Baltimore oriole comes to us with the apple blossoms. The glowing of his plumage kindles in us a fire of affection for the out of doors. The oriole is a sun worshipper, and he wears in part the sun's livery. The black of his raiment is only a badge of mourning for cloudy days. ...On occasion the oriole perches in a fruit tree and frames himself with blossoms. Does he know that he is one of the most rarely beautiful of nature's children? Probably not, for he, is a bird of modest manner, but little blame will come to him if he appears to pose a bit in the abounding blossoms of apple and hawthorns.

The Baltimore Oriole is generally an uncommon spring and fall migrant in the Carolina Piedmont. This bird is also found at feeders here with some regularity during the winter months. The Baltimore Oriole has only been sporadically found in the Piedmont during breeding season. We have records from all months of the year, but sightings of birds outside of the mountains during breeding season are not common.

Most sightings during migration are of one, two, or perhaps a few birds. A large "flock," later estimated to be a total count of 30 birds, was reported at Evergreen Nature Preserve in Charlotte on September 2, 2001. This is almost three times the other high counts tallied in this region.

The presence of the Baltimore Oriole in the Carolinas during the winter is a phenomenon that appears to have been first reported in states along the Atlantic Seaboard in the late 1940s. A few locations in the Carolinas began

reporting Baltimore Orioles present during the winter months as well. The first winter bird reported in this region was a bird Gabriel Cannon found in Spartanburg on December 21, 1947. In 1955, a pair of female orioles spent the winter visiting the well-stocked feeders at Charlotte's Wing Haven. Participants in the Charlotte Christmas Bird Count made a special effort to insure that this pair was counted that year, adding a new species to that count. On January 29, 1961, Bill Anderson caught and banded an immature Baltimore Oriole in Charlotte. Joe Norwood provided the following comment in the March 1961 Mecklenburg Audubon newsletter: "It may be that Baltimore Orioles are extending their winter range to perhaps 'uncommon winter resident'...they have not been unusual for several winters."

Several researchers studied this change in the wintering status of this oriole and determined the numbers had increased fairly steadily from the 1940s through the end of the 1960s. Almost 700 wintering birds were counted in North Carolina alone. Many of these orioles were captured and banded and color-marked at seven different banding stations in the state. All were recorded in suburban or urban areas with winter bird feeders. In 1969, one of the researchers noted that "a change in the general climate over the eastern United States" was one potential cause of this new phenomenon. In 1970, South Carolina ornithologist E. Milby Burton noted: "So many records have been received in recent years that the Baltimore Oriole is now becoming a fairly common winter visitor." Burton reported one feeder station in Darlington had 36 orioles visiting it in 1968.

Today, wintering orioles are fairly commonplace. A survey conducted in 2016 reported 65 discrete locations in North Carolina and 65 locations in South Carolina with a total of 463 orioles in the latter state—the highest number recorded nationally. At times, 12 or more Baltimore Orioles can be found visiting a single feeder in Charlotte or other cities in the Central Carolinas during the winter months. Providing peanut and suet feeders, fresh fruit, and jelly, are the best ways to attract these lovely birds to your backyard. Dr. Rob Bierregaard also recommends planting camellias to help attract wintering Baltimore Orioles. He dubbed these lovely plants "oriole magnets."

Most Baltimore Orioles spend their winters in the tropics. In spring, they migrate north to their breeding grounds in the central and northeastern United States and Canada. Some breed in the North Carolina mountains. None have been confirmed breeding in the South Carolina mountains in modern times. Rare and sporadic breeding occurs in the Piedmont of both states.

We only have a few reports of nesting in the Central Carolinas. William McIlwaine provided the first nest account in Charlotte: "I saw to-day a Rose-breasted Grosbeak which, according to the books, will not remain with us to nest. But the books say the same of the Baltimore Oriole I saw this morning, and two years ago [about May

15, 1926] I found the nest of a pair of these birds within fifty feet of East Boulevard. But I admit that this is the only one I ever did find." He later added: "Two years ago I found a Baltimore Oriole nest on East Boulevard across the street from the home of John Iverson...and the orioles are the wonderful [nest] weavers."

R.B. McLaughlin discovered Baltimore Orioles breeding on his family farm outside of Statesville in the summer of 1932. His published report also noted that his find contradicted the breeding range of this oriole published in the 1919 edition of *Birds of North Carolina*.

Nesting Baltimore Orioles were "somewhat regularly" discovered nesting near Clemmons outside Winston-Salem in Forsyth County from 1972 through 1976, possibly in 1980, and confirmed again in 1989. Nests were seen and adults were observed feeding young. None have been reported in recent years. A nest was confirmed in Boykin, SC, in Kershaw County in the summer of 1987.

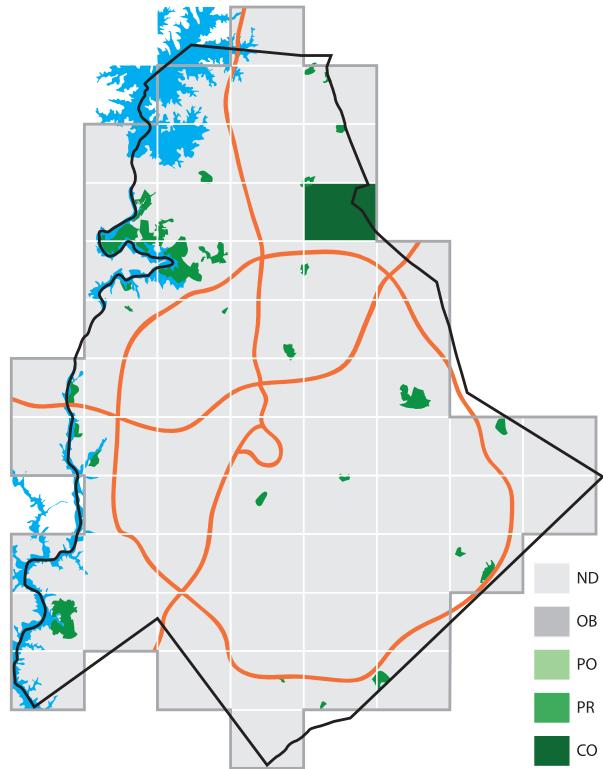
John Buckman discovered Baltimore Orioles apparently nesting at Lake Don T. Howell in Cabarrus County during the summer of 2004. A nest was located in 2006 and eggs were incubated, but it appeared the nest failed. Another nest was located in May and June 2007, but that nest failed as well. A second pair was believed to be breeding nearby at the Concord Mills Mall wetlands that year.

The second report of Baltimore Oriole nesting in Mecklenburg County came 87 years after the first. On May 12, 2013, Jean Sharbaugh, a local photographer, observed and photographed an adult male Baltimore Oriole alongside a lake on the Highland Creek golf course in eastern Mecklenburg County. The bird was seen repeatedly visiting a sycamore tree on the walking path near the water. Twelve days later (24 May), Ms. Sharbaugh photographed one of the orioles carrying food



Baltimore Oriole at nest on Highland Creek Golf Course on June 5, 2013. (Phil Fowler)

to a nest in the tree, and on 27 May she photographed both the male and a female oriole carrying food to the nest. By 2 June, one nestling could be observed flapping its wings and the feeding continued. On 5 June, Jim and Cynthia Griffiths, Jan and Phil Fowler, and Stephanie Jones visited the nest and found one fledgling out of the nest on the ground. Both adults tried to feed the bird and appeared to try and offer food to it to draw it to a nearby tree branch. Phil Fowler photographed this event, and on 8 June the male oriole was seen bringing food to young birds in two different trees; presumably, at least two young successfully fledged. In 2014, Jan Fowler reported that the old nest had been reinforced and was being used again by the oriole pair. The pendular nest hung down from the branches of the tree about 20 feet off the ground and baling twine and fishing line had both been used as materials in the nest construction. This nest location is about 5 miles southwest of Lake Don T. Howell.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Very Local (PR/0, CO/1)